

Book 17 - Crying Voices

There was a cry rising from within.

The beginning of every human being is also a cry. Just as in the old tale that speaks of Man's expulsion from paradise for committing the sin of coveting the forbidden fruit, mankind once again weeps as we are burdened with life.

For the sin of bearing sin is too great.

I gaze at the red jewel, or perhaps it's a red egg, standing before me. I thought of calling his name, but I immediately gave up. Because I found my gladius lying on the floor.

Garnet never handled anything recklessly. Maybe due to his years in the orphanage, where the concept of ownership was vague, perhaps because he realized early how to survive in the City. He even kept the wrapping paper from the gifts I gave him.

That's why.

I know the painful reason behind the gladius laying on the ground.

"....."

I lift the gladius. The crawling wailers approach me. Among them, an unsightly, flower-like thing ran towards me before the others.

Gubo had taken out his karambit even before that thing reached me. Without thinking of the consequences, he thrust it right at me. I extended my hand to stop him.

"Don't forget your original purpose."

"Why..."

Gubo shrugs his shoulders after looking doubtful for a second and heads for the corner where the one called Aseah is.

That thing comes near me in a panicked manner.

It opened the gaping hole that seemed to function as its mouth, appearing unable to resist tasting anything it could fit in there. It seemed like it would continue roaming about the past, present, and future.

I could hear the clicking sound of its teeth, which are clustered in a thin layer. Surrounding the teeth is a bundle of threads clumped together like dandelion flower seeds. But they are not pure white, but a gray that has forgotten sunlight. Perhaps these flower seeds will never soar through the wind. They are too heavy to fly away like cotton wool.

However, if I cut it open with the gladius, they would easily disperse. But...

What use would I have for a decapitated head?

Heightened thermogeneration. Heat increased to the utmost limits. When the temperature had reached the point where smoke could be seen, I inserted the scorching iron blade into its 'mouth'. As if waiting for it, countless fangs rushed toward my hand.



(Kiiih!)

However, not even the very tip of a single tooth reached me. A strange moaning sounded simultaneously to the searing of the heat, and a terrible burning smell spread. The red-hot gladius appeared to have sealed the mouth of this greedy one. Yet the eyes of this thing still looked directly at me, and its mouth, which refused to close, constantly prodded at me. This thing doesn't know how to give up. It has no patience. It's filled only with the desire to chew and swallow.

"....."

As I pull out my gladius, a bloody sensation fills my head. My vision is disturbed by the cries, and memories of the past rush between the cracks.

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When one lusts insatiably after riches, nothing will ever suffice. Denver was the first among us to realize that fact. After many nights of extreme hunger to the point of fainting, Denver had become a voracious whirlwind.

Driven only by desire, she leaped forward, unconcerned if it caused all the roads she traversed to crumble. Such feelings of self-pity had pushed her to the garbage dump, along with the chicken bone fragments that had one day been her meals.

I'm not so different. No, perhaps I was even more miserable.

For the sake of the children in the orphanage, to protect the Office, to endure on my own... I repeated numerous excuses as my reasons and turning points, but I, and her too, simply wanted to catch something and eat it whole to make us feel alive.

We were all hungry. We were too busy forcefully trying to satisfy our desires, sinking our teeth into somebody's flesh, consuming it without being able to digest it properly.

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I am no different than I was then.
I peeled off a piece of flesh entangled in the gladius.

"The Red Gaze... You don't seem to know, don't you?"

I look toward the voice I heard and see Jumsoon gasping, barely able to stand. Wounds could be seen all over his body. Was he pressured into a struggle during his fight with Garnet, or did the crawling wailers stubbornly cling to him?

"This thing's true identity... Shall I tell you what it is?"

I silently approach Jumsoon. It was all too obvious that he was anticipating me. His eyes watched to see if I would fall to my knees in anguish in the face of despair.

However, another wailer tried to close the gap. I twist the handle and make the blade burn hot-red.

It has several feet attached to it. Bare feet. They're completely swollen as if it had wandered from place to place...

"....."

On its feet, an unusual piece of cloth clings to them.
It's a fabric with a jumble of blue and black patterns. I had seen that before.
I had seen a child in the orphanage wearing it to hide a large scar on her ankle caused by broken glass.
It belonged to a certain child from the orphanage.

With displeasure, I am reminded of that day.

There was one day that children always waited for with bated breath. On that day, they were lavished with gifts and blessings simply because they were children.

On the day before it, the children were unable to sleep properly. I always wondered if the weight of that anticipation was tacked onto me. The weight of the massive packages I held with both hands never felt particularly bad.

Garnet later told me that the reason the kids waited so impatiently was not to receive their presents but to see me become particularly generous with my laughter on that one day. When I realized why their faces would become so bright as they looked into my eyes, to the point of forgetting to put on their shoes, I couldn't help but truly smile.

"And still..."

I wondered if this was the place where those feet, determined to reach the end of the line, finally stopped.

The feet ran into my body with all of their strength. Unconcerned if its flesh would be slashed here and there due to the impact or if its trunk would become inflamed. Its sole perfect eye stared at me.

It doesn't resemble the look of that day. Except it does. But I don't want to say it does.

I must not be tainted by this new flow. I avoid its gaze and slit its many ankles.

(Gyaah!)

The blood loss, stopped by the cauterization, doesn't lead to its death. Instead, it slumps down and cowers, yet it never stops crawling. So it can reach me. Its cries echo throughout the room, and the lumps of flesh writhe senselessly.

"....."

A warm, raw feeling travels down my fingertips.
This time, too, the cries pushed me far, far into the past.

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On my first visit to the orphanage, I still was hesitant. And then, one of the children suddenly came up to me and grabbed my hand.

"Wow, mister! Your hand is so rough!"

The tiny palm touched the back of my hand without any hesitation. Although it was covered with blisters, the soft warmth that showered my hand was exceedingly warm. That was when I recognized how much I missed that warmth. I wanted to huddle together and dwell on that warmth all the time.

Even if I knew that was nothing more than deception and hypocrisy.

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"Why..."

I didn't need to open my mouth to reply, for Jumsoon already seemed to know the answer. Jumsoon backed away as if he didn't anticipate it.

"Why... You already knew the truth..."

Did he want to ask me how I could stay so calm?
I was under no obligation to answer, so I kept my mind silent.

"Mmh, this is rather nice, isn't it? The Red Gaze... it's because of that unexpectedness that you're so fun."

Jumsoon continues to yell.

"Aseah! Gather all rift generators around me. You must concentrate them all on me."

He shouted at Aseah, his face contorted in a strange, eerie way.

"Will you be able to stand it?"

"Kuhu, if I can't bear it, would that even matter? Increase the refraction index to the same level as before... No! Turn it to the maximum."

Jumsoon yelled loudly, perhaps in a hurry. Or maybe it was a cry of ecstasy.

"In that case, the rifts in the glass windows would reach an absurd reading..."

"Kuhuhu... If that kid was accepted, why couldn't I? And... aren't you hoping for that deep inside? To see what will happen to me?"

"...It would be hard to deny."

Next to Aseah, Gubo was also looking at Jumsoon with an intrigued face. It wasn't the kind of expression one would expect when faced with an enemy. They all looked the same. I took a step forward, feeling a strange discomfort.

"...Kh."

At that moment, I felt something shimmering and looked around the area to see all the reflectors attached to the top of the experimental tubes facing toward Jumsoon. I couldn't see it, but I felt like something was shining intensely down on me.

"Uhu... Uhaha!"



In that strange light, Jumsoon looked like he was ushering in pure joy and happiness. This expression did not change even as a thick, taut shell, emerging from who knows where, enveloped him.

As I was bewildered, carelessly unable to move, another crying voice initiated its approach.

The water in its transparent torso was making a sloshing sound. It seemed that the only course it could take was to sink into the mire, having given up on flowing. However, it seems to have difficulty controlling its sinking, spitting out the water in its lungs. The water comes rushing out to the floor as if sighing.

I burned its mouth shut. Now it can't spit out anything anymore.

(Kiih!)

"....."

A damp sensation coils around my body.
Memories of bygone days, similar to before, come flooding in, undulating like waves.

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I spent a lot of time alone. Being a Fixer is akin to building a wall brick by brick, all the while trying to rise above it all on your own. In the end, when the day comes when you'll have no option but to become a pawn in somebody else's schemes, there will be no one willing to take your back. That's why you have to build the wall by yourself.

For that reason, I often had to close my mouth, eyes, and ears. I saw no need to cast a personal gaze on a world where ill fates are overlooked. I didn't want to put my heart into something that could crumble at any moment.

And so I sank. Perhaps the only thing that stopped me from drowning was Lapis' sudden visit to the orphanage.

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When my mind regained its senses, Jumsoon's egg-like form began to wriggle and change into something else. The indigo eggshell twisted and swelled here and there, gradually taking on a human shape. The shell grew hard, shiny white scales covered by numerous dots of the same color as the eggshell.

Then, a slimy, thick tail sprouted out of his lower back, completing the guise...

(Belch)

(Gyaah!)

A speckled foot crushed the thing in front of me.
Pouring out of it, together with the water, was a hairband outfitted with a cherry fruit ornament.

Suddenly, I feel something cold around my face and neck.

Water droplets come forth, falling to the floor. They weren't intense, like the ones that dangled around Garnet's eyes. There was no sobbing, only a constant stream of light rain.

The husk that had encased Jumsoon is hanging onto the machinery. An indigo blue shell. Jumsoon had broken out from within and now began to step forward, step by step.



The body was speckled with countless dots. In the eyes that glazed over, in the tongue that flicked around arrogantly, even his internal organs were covered with them. I don't think I've ever seen anything so strange.

"...What happened?"

"The universe... conceived me once more."

A simple question clashes with an incomprehensible answer.

Jumsoon walks. Beneath his steps, a black puddle forms in the shape of a dot. It wasn't like the spreading of ink nor the adhesion of paint, but as if the dot was engraved onto the floor.

(Gyaah!)

As soon as one of the crying voices grazed one of the dots, it instantaneously burst open. Does the body explode when it touches those dots? It was only for a moment, but I believe I saw its body become covered by dots akin to someone with nettle rash. Either way, you'd probably be unable to finish a single word of warning if you touched them.

"Furthermore, I proclaim that only I can expand the universe in pursuit of beauty."

Jumsoon's arm drew near me in the blink of an eye. Still, I reflexively thrust out the gladius in an attempt to lop it off.

"...!"



Surely, for Jumsoon, this struggle against me was his very first.

However.

He was already used to it.

He seemed to have become acquainted with my method of attack quickly. Even if he understood it beforehand, he moved as if he saw my attacks firsthand.

"Tsk."

"Kuhuhu."

It has been a few minutes filled with several skirmishes. I realized that this sensation was not just a coincidence.

I chose to switch from slashing to piercing during our engagement. As I focused on aiming at his vital points, I supplemented my attacks with the use of "Shin". However, Jumsoon once again grasped the essence of my piercing attacks, and immediately countered them.

"Thirty-four times."

"That was the number of times I died when you pierced me here, in the artery."

Jumsoon said so as he pointed at his chest. There laid a big dot in its center. That was one of the areas I was focusing on. It's the most essential vital point, which leads to death in seconds once hit.

"Forty-six times."

"That was the number of times I died when you pierced me here."

Jumsoon pointed to his neck.

"And, as soon as I tried to maintain distance between us, you would throw your sword with a ring of light, right here."

Jumsoon pointed to a spot near his thigh.

He listed every vital point in the order I prefer to aim at them. If my attack against the heart is blocked, I will go for the external carotid artery that passes through the throat, and if that is impossible, then I follow with a slash at the large posterior tibial artery in the thigh. If all these attacks are prevented, and I have no choice but to continue close-quarters combat, I wait for an opportunity to hit the wrist's radial artery.

...Of course, I'm sure this is the first time I fought against this person.
Yet, his actions and words...

"Do you see? All of these moments are displayed throughout my body."

"The yous of several worlds have filled me with... experience. Huhu."

Jumsoon spoke in a composed voice as he swung his leg.

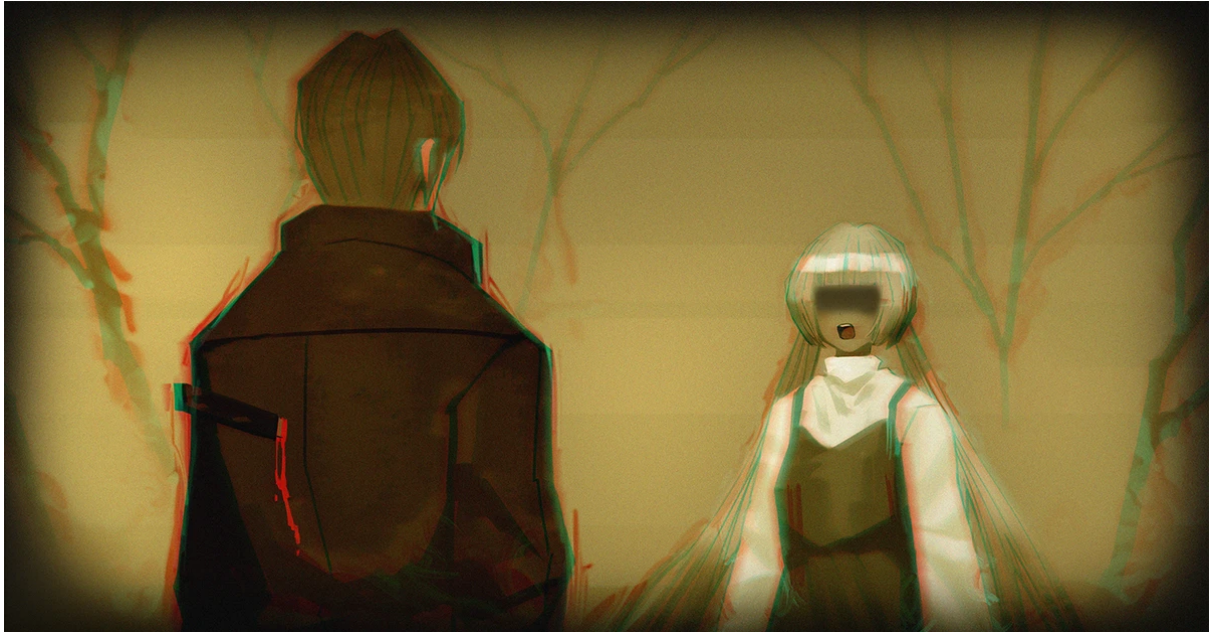
"Kh..."

The unexpected trajectory allowed for his leg to lightly scratch my left arm. Then, the dots on Jumsoon's body spread throughout my body.
I had expected an explosion, but...

"...You there."

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In my field of vision.



Lapis was here. My back was bleeding before I knew it. There was a thin knife stuck in it that Lapis must have stabbed me with just now.

That kid always appeared unnoticed when I would deliver the presents with a merry smile and candy in her mouth. At those times, she would always write something ridiculous on a piece of paper and stick it on my back.

Now that had become a sharp weapon...

"Why did you do that?"

Lapis' question pierced through me. Deeper than that blade. The question was vague, but I understood its intent.

I was the one who killed those children's parents and sent them to the orphanage.

I sensed Lapis' surprise attack. There was no way I couldn't. I could have avoided it or fought against her, but I chose to ignore the tingling pain of the thin blade that had stabbed me.

But I couldn't ignore that.

"You gave everyone presents... sent money every month... Did you get any consolation from that?"

No, no consolation was to be found.

Maybe I was wishing for this day. Instead of staring at the gift in my hands, looking at your expectant eyes for the moment and realizing you had put a piece of paper in my back, I wanted you to stab me in that very same spot with all the force you could muster.

As I pointed at the corpses of your parents with the same blade that took their lives, I wondered if the only way to heal that wound would be not by whistling and rolling candy around your mouth, as you've always done, but with the edge of a pale, thin blade.

"I..."

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"M-mister..."

Before I knew it, I was in my Office. It had become a hellscape. As if attempting to show that a fierce battle had taken place here, not a single desk or drawer was where they were meant to be.

Lan Yen was lying in a strange position. His entire body was covered with dozens of wounds as if he had been slashed to pieces. Garnet lay beside him as well.

This was the consequence of my judgment. We should have stayed together no matter what. I could hear Garnet saying, "I want to be part of your strategy."

"Mister... Yen p-protected me..."

I examined the depth of the wounds Garnet had sustained. They were of proficient and professional skill. It was a chopping wound appropriate for leaving someone near death. Their intention wasn't instant death, but probably a message to me. Considering their ability, this is a warning. I watched as Garnet shortly breathed his last.

It reminded me of someone who was begging for their life.

I was unable to do anything back then...

The present me can.

But I no longer know what to do.

Everything had become a lump of guilt.

Nevertheless, those weren't the only sins I bore.

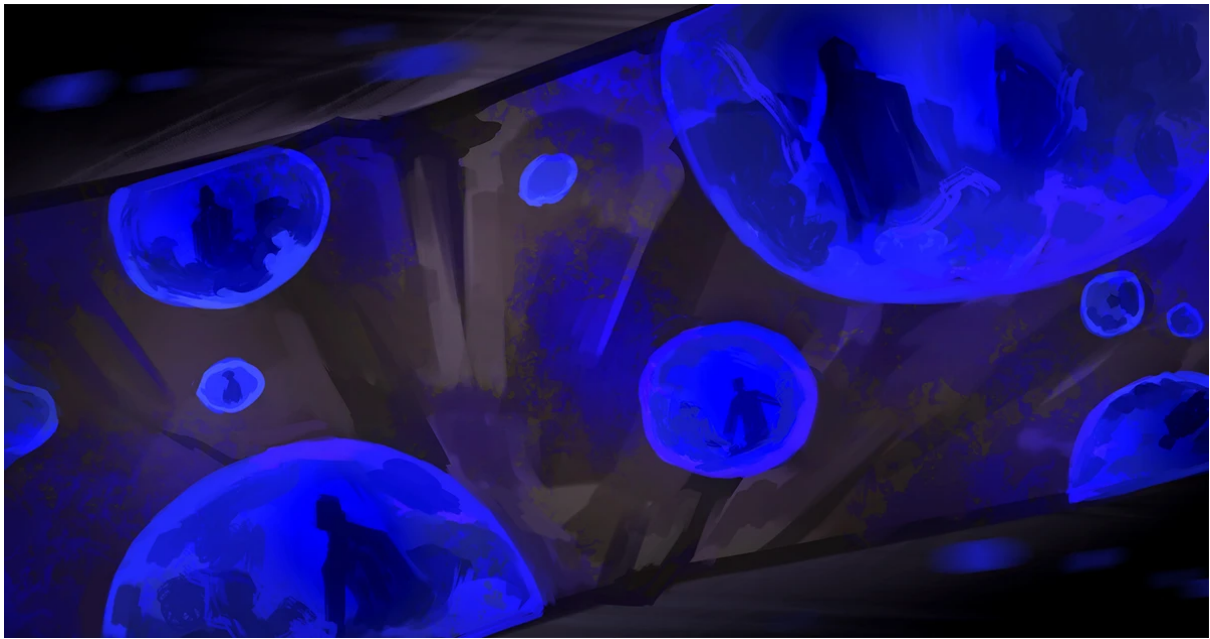
Every step I took, every gesture I made, and every look I gave brought misfortune to someone else.

...But I'm not so superficial that I could die from this forged guilt.

"Kh!"

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I threw a strong punch at his cheek, causing the dark-colored dot in my hand to spread widely before suddenly stopping.



I see, Garnet did come here with me. Sure enough, that was only a false image created by the dots.

But... it was so vivid as if I had actually experienced it.

"What about this, drowning in a universe linked by dots... You finally want to die, don't you?"

...He went through various worlds like this to fight me.

Large and small dots tinged with a dark indigo color... When I looked into these, they seemed to be those faraway worlds themselves.

Those dots covering Jumsoon must have served this purpose as well.

"You..."

"That's it...! All those varied dots... coming together as ecstasy..."

He wanted to say something more, but no more words came out.

The vision projected in front of his eyes, those worlds. One after another, they changed.

Towards a world of infinite possibilities, someday, somewhere...

Uniformly, they all stabbed me with something sharp.

The time that seemed to be an eternity, in a moment, passed.

My vision was eventually embraced by complete darkness.

And then.

[...Ver.]

From somewhere, a voice began to speak to me as if in a trance.

An awfully warm voice...

A voice that made me want to become completely buried in it for all time.

It spoke to me.

[It's nice to talk to you again.]

Translated by @SnakeskinFS